

General histories, piratical geographies, and justice

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Scholars of empire commonly acknowledge that the terms pirate and privateer, buccaneer and corsair (as well as raider, rover, sea thief, marauder, freebooter, swashbuckler...) were used lightly and interchangeably within colloquial, literary, personal and administrative discourses. But in recent and popular accounts of the British empire, those shifty and extended legal moments in which either the pirate (outlaw predator of maritime commerce) becomes the privateer (state-sanctioned predator of maritime commerce) or the privateer becomes the pirate have acquired the weight of both origin and paradigm. For example, in his prominent *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (2003), Niall Ferguson finds both actual beginning and broad analogue for the history of imperialism in the life-myth of Henry Morgan's rise from pirate to admiral to governor to planter (circa 1635-1688). To very different political effect, Lauren Benton's much referenced *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires 1400-1900* (2010) finds an origin in the moment that the pirate loudly performs himself as a privateering vanguard, initiating both the imposition of European law on further geographies, and the close regionalisation of that law. Focusing on exciting scenes of maritime predation, Miles Ogborn's high profile *Global Lives: Britain and the World 1550-1800* (2008) recognises definitive transformations from 'sea-going noblemen in the sixteenth century' into 'mercantile buccaneers in the seventeenth century' into 'merely common sailors helping themselves to booty in the early eighteenth century'. Ogborn uses the privateer-pirate to summarise key political and perceptive changes marking epochs of imperialism, as well as the changing class politics of empire.

Such sweeping turns to the figure of the pirate to exemplify comprehensive dynamics are methodologically troubling: and not least because they heavily rely upon the narratives of piracy offered in 'Captain Charles Johnson's' *The General History [of the Pyrates]* (1724). The fictional nature of this text has been curiously irrelevant to scholars in search of anecdotes to exemplify large arguments. But while the book has been influentially deployed to expansive and assertive effect, it remains remarkably under-studied. This paper offers a reading of the text's ranging, contradictory, earnest/feckless approaches to order and resistance, legitimate and illegitimate violence. I move from tracing the book's intricate fictional narrative forms towards an appreciation of its central and critical engagements with geography and geolegal forms. In understanding how oceans and islands—real and fictional—are represented as piratical geographies, the paper takes the book out of its spurious position within historiography, and understands it as speaking intimately within narratives of justice.